Good evening Chairman WK, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Tonight, I would like to share with you a little secret of my own. Ever since I joined the HKSAR Government, I have been taking up outside job until today, though without pay as a volunteer. The Association for Engineering and Medical Volunteer Services, which is better known as EMV in short, was founded by me and fellow university graduates, mostly in engineering, medicine and social sciences. It is a non-profit organization with the mission to serve the disabled and the elderly through engineering & medical volunteer services. Thirty years back, EMV started with ten members and little operating budget. Today, we have about 100 staff members, 400 volunteers and an annual budget over HK$20M. [Slide #2]

EMV is dedicated to pioneer and provide comprehensive rehabilitation services for the disabled and the elderly, with the goal of enhancing their independence and integration with the community. It has a wide portfolio of services and these are some of them for your information [Slide #3], and please visit the website www.emv.org.hk for more details.

- Design and fabrication of technical and computer aids
- Adaptation and repair of rehabilitation aids
- Electric Wheelchair Repair Clinic and Resource Center
- Professional consultation and assessment
- Digital Inclusion Centre
- Rehabilitation Software Libraries
- Independent Living Fund
- Supported Employment
- Desktop Publishing Centre
- The Endeavour
- Social Enterprises

According to the World Health Organization, disability is a term that covers impairment, activity limitation, and participation restriction. Impairment is a problem in body function or structure, activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action, while participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. [Slide #4]
This is a factual and scientific interpretation of disability, but how does it relates to life in reality. As far as disabilities are concerned, most people would see things as they are and take it as it is. For example, the blind is unable to see, the deaf is unable to hear, and not many people would question or challenge this kind of conventional belief. It is true that the blind could not see with their eyeballs, but many of them read through tactile touches, with the aid of Braille and other means. They recognise others by voices, and they simply see in a way different from us. The great American author Helen Keller, and local activist Chong Chan Yau are blind, and they live and work independently no different from us. They clearly demonstrate what the blind can accomplish in contrast to the pre-occupation of many people.

We have to realise that the world is not what used to be. If we look back in time, say a thousand years, the 3 gentlemen in the photo and myself would definitely be disabled persons. The reason is obvious, but there is nothing to do with our civil service background. While you may wonder why, the answer is simple. I suffer from Myopia or short-sightedness, unable to focus visual images on the retina of my eyeballs. At a time before the invention of eye-glasses, I would be unable to read, deprived the opportunity to study and not to mention becoming an engineer. Because of my short-sightedness, the chance of doing anything serious with eyesight would be jeopardised. Given a pair of eye-glasses, which is now a necessity for most people, a disabled person a thousand years ago now becomes able. From the perspective of history, disability is an inverse function of time and invention.

Do you recognise this gentleman - Oscar Pistorius? Oscar is famously known as the ‘Blade Runner’ or “the fastest man on no legs”. He is a double amputee who has won a right to compete with able-bodied athletes on the track. He is the first amputee sprinter qualified for the Olympics in London this year, representing South Africa. Double amputee is supposed unable to walk fast, but given a pair of carbon fibre artificial legs, Oscar takes slightly more than 45 seconds to complete 400 metres. He runs probably faster than anyone of us here in this banquet hall tonight. Disability is therefore an inverse function of technological development.
Do you remember seeing this young boy Matthew James recently on the news? [Slide #7] Matthew was born without his left hand and he learnt to live with a simple open-and-close grip prosthetic limb for 14 years. As a teenager, he dares to dream and he puts his wish into action. He wrote to Mercedes Benz and proposed a deal. If Mercedes would sponsor this bionic hand that worth £35,000, he would let Mercedes put their logo on the arm, like advertisement seen on Formula 1 race cars. Mercedes was touched and agreed to the proposal. With his new hand, Matthew returns to school, plays sports and conducts experiments in the lab which used to be difficult for him. With the bionic hand, Matthew is given the opportunity to fully realise his potential.

Bionic arms and hands have been available for years. The technology and the product are there but Matthew just couldn’t afford to have it. Given time, invention and technological development, disability becomes dependent on affordability. This is a truth as well as an irony that we all need to reflect what disability really is nowadays.

During my 30 years involvement in rehabilitation, I have witnessed many amazing stories that clearly reflect that ability is not just about body function, muscular or skeletal strength, but more a matter of the heart, mind and soul. To me, the term disability should be reserved for those who refuse to make their best endeavour to live life to their fullest, not because they cannot but because they choose not.

“Improving the World through Engineering” is the vision of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, and I appeal for your participation to help enhance the independence and quality of life of the disabled through affordable engineering solutions. [Slide #8] With this, I conclude my sharing and thank you for your very kind attention and patience.

11 May 2012